

Stop your niggling,

That sloping pitch is a poor excuse

By James Lawton

JACK CHARLTON promises a ritual slaughter of WYCOMBE on the wide, well manicured reaches of Ayresome Park.

MIDDLESBROUGH, he argues, were hugely handicapped by the north face of the Wycombe pitch. It apparently explained a performance so limp in spirit and barren in ideas that the only time I truly sensed the presence of a First Division side was when Willie Maddren and Graeme Souness twice decided that cynical fouls were the only way out of tight situations.

From some of the platitude-punching characters in Football League management, the "sloping pitch" excuses would scarcely raise an eyebrow. Coming from a man as bold and as honest as Jack Charlton I find them particularly depressing.

Low-risk policy

Certainly the 0-0 draw carried a somewhat harsher message for me. It was that the old aristocracy of First Division football has gone.

In its place are teams like Middlesbrough, who find it possible to rise to positions of prominence on a low risk policy of defensive football, which includes a capacity to counter-attack.

Wycombe, of course, do not know about such subtleties. They go out to play football with the eccentric idea that it is something to be enjoyed, that winning games is about taking the play to your opponents, employing all the skill at their disposal.

Middlesbrough found that level of skill an embarrassing revelation and I suspect it may yet give them a twinge of apprehension before the tie is over.

Wycombe manager Brian Lee accepts that Jack Charlton is probably right when he says tomorrow's replay will be an entirely different game. What he cannot accept—like me—is Middlesbrough's willingness to blame the Wycombe pitch for their failure on Saturday.

He says: "I am disappointed in this. I would accept it if they said 'we didn't like the pitch.' That's fair enough. But to blame your performance on a pitch well that's too much.

Jack